

Political scandals hang over Moon's rush to populist projects

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As South Korea's left-wing President Moon Jae-in enters the third year of his presidency, he appears to be rushing into two all-out populist projects at the risk of his presidential credibility.



First, Moon is rushing into joint economic projects with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un despite Kim's commitment to denuclearisation remaining uncertain after the collapse of his recent Hanoi summit with US President Donald Trump. The other equally controversial development is the greenlight his administration has given to 23 state-led stimulus projects estimated to cost around US\$21.5 billion. The projects have not undergone any feasibility studies.

This sudden announcement of fast-track spending has raised pork-barrelling allegations among not only opposition parties and the media, but also among Moon's own supporters including the influential Citizens Coalition of Economic Justice. Why is Moon rushing into these populist projects, together with ten other inter-Korea projects under his 'New Economic Map for the Korean Peninsula' which alone will cost an estimated [US\\$57 billion over the next twenty years](#) ^[1]?

This question needs to be raised not only because of the political scandals hanging over Moon, but also because South Korea's GDP growth is slowing to a [six](#) ^[2]-year low. South Korea's unemployment rate, in particular, hit an eight-year high in August 2018. Unsurprisingly, Moon's approval rating has fallen to [a record low of 48.4 per cent](#) ^[3].

Crucially, [Moon's disapproval rating](#) ^[4] among men in their 20s has risen to [64.1 per cent](#) ^[5], the highest across all age groups according to a Realmeter survey conducted in December 2018.

The young males who were once strong supporters of Moon and the ruling Democratic Party have turned their backs on his ‘people-centred economic policy’ which, contrary to his repeated assurances, has made their livelihoods even poorer than before. This is perhaps most evident in the country’s income inequality in the last fiscal quarter of 2018, which reached [the worst levels](#) ^[6] since Statistics Korea began collecting data 16 years ago.

Nor is [Moon’s political performance](#) ^[7] exhibiting brighter signs. Two mega-sized scandals are unfolding in a South Korean-style *Days of Our Lives* saga, exposing multiple allegations that could threaten both his presidency and the future of the Democratic Party.

The opposition Liberty Korea Party (LKP) revealed the first scandal in December 2018 when it submitted a petition insisting that the Ministry of Environment had created [a blacklist](#) ^[8] of 24 public servants based on their conservative political leanings. The LKP alleged that this list was the basis of a political purge. The LKP also claimed that the President’s office, the Blue House, was behind the purge and that members of Moon’s presidential election campaign had been appointed to the newly vacated posts. Following weeks of investigation, the prosecution banned former environmental minister Kim Eun-Kyung from leaving the country.

Moon’s problem is that the scandal resembles the blacklist which contributed to the impeachment of former president Park Guen-hye. Park’s blacklist also led to the imprisonment of [six former top aides](#) ^[9], including her chief of staff and two ministers of culture.

Moon’s spokesman has reportedly demanded that the media refrain from using the derogatory nomenclature of ‘blacklist’ in reference to the current administration’s personnel policy. Still, the blacklist scandal hangs over not only the moral conduct of Moon’s office, but is also the real impetus behind his rush to populist projects: general elections are about 15 months away.

The second and even more controversial political scandal involves [Kim Kyoung-soo](#) ^[10], a sitting governor of South Gyeongsang province who was sentenced to two years in jail on 30 January for an online opinion-rigging scheme implemented ahead of the May 2017 presidential election in which Moon rose to power. Kim was found guilty of taking part ‘in manipulating the order of online comments under 80,000 different news articles’ which, [said](#) ^[11] the presiding judge Sung Chang-ho, ‘damaged the proper generation of public opinion in the online sphere’.

Until recently, Kim was dubbed as the strongest candidate for succeeding Moon. He is a former Democrat Party lawmaker and was the last secretary of former president Roh Moo-hyun. He also assisted Moon during his 2012 and 2016 presidential campaigns as the latter’s public relations manager. The court’s verdict on Kim’s jail sentence subsequently rocked the Democratic Party, which has claimed that ‘the verdict [in] immediately placing him behind bars violated the principles of the country’s criminal laws’.

The Democrat Party’s president, Lee Hae-chan, has gone all out to save Kim, forming a special committee that is threatening to impeach judges, including the presiding judge Sung. Moon’s silence on this obvious violation of the rule of law is generating public mistrust to the point of risking his presidential credibility. Moon’s legitimacy is based on the claimed mission of guarding that democratic principle, since he is generally viewed as the offspring of the

‘candlelight revolution’ which led to Park’s impeachment.

By addressing the Democratic Party’s undemocratic behaviour, Moon can show the South Korean people that he is the fair and honest president [he pledged to become](#) ^[12] in his inauguration address. After all, Governor Kim’s online opinion-rigging operations directly involved Moon’s own presidential election campaign. Moon also needs to clarify the ultimate aim behind his rush towards populist projects if he genuinely wishes to create, in his own words, [‘a world without privileges and foul play](#) ^[13].

But under the present circumstances, it is hard to dismiss the conservatives’ allegations of pork barrelling. The immediate and ultimate aim of Moon’s projects is also increasingly clear: a sweeping victory in the 2020 parliamentary elections as a foundation for the Democratic Party to retain power when the 2022 presidential election comes around.

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[1] US\$57 billion over the next twenty years:

<https://pulsenews.co.kr/view.php?year=2019&no=91668>

[2] six:

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/South-Korea-s-2018-GDP-growth-slows-to-6-yr-low-trade-woes-dim-outlook>

[3] a record low of 48.4 per cent:

<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20181203000130>

[4] Moon’s disapproval

rating:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2019/01/22/moons-popularity-wanes-as-south-koreas-economy-stalls/>

[5] 64.1 per cent: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/12/356_260470.html

[6] the worst levels: http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2019/02/488_264166.html

[7] Moon’s political

performance:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/28/koreas-moon-is-waning-in-the-face-of-vested-interests/>

[8] a blacklist: <http://koreaajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3059711>

[9] six former top aides:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/world/asia/south-korea-park-aides-artists-blacklist.html>

[10] Kim Kyoung-soo: https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2019/02/251_262961.html

[11] said: <http://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=262961>

[12] he pledged to become:

<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/04/05/will-moon-shine-a-light-on-korean-corruption/>

[13] a world without privileges and foul play:

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